Co-operation in Practice – Education

In 2012 the Co-operative Federation of Victoria Ltd (Co-operatives Victoria), the Co-operative College in the UK and the SouthEast Housing Co-operative Ltd co-produced a series of short films on Co-operation in Practice featuring the then Chief Executive Officer and Principal of the Co-operative College Mervyn Wilson – Directors, Education, Governance, International, Members, Principles, Social Enterprises and Values. Filming was undertaken by Trade Creative. For each film the Co-operative College prepared a transcript.

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Education is another of the Rochdale principles. I want to spend a few moments exploring what co-operative education means both past and present. And it is probably easier to understand it if we look back at why it was so important to the Rochdale Pioneers and early co-operators. They were concerned that as democratic organisations their members had the skills and competencies to enable them to run their very rapidly growing businesses effectively. We are talking of a time long before universal education. Lots of their people had limited literacy skills, and if they were actually going to develop their businesses they needed to catch up quickly. So early co-operatives set up libraries, reading rooms, education classes – absolutely pioneering adult education, alongside setting up children's classes often run on Sundays as socialist Sunday schools or co-operative Sunday schools as well. The objective of this was very much to put education at the heart of their organisations and at the heart of their communities. Education became a core principle and generally speaking co-operatives had a rule that allocated a proportion of their annual surplus to educational purposes.

As co-operatives grew, in many cases this principle got neglected. I think that if I look around the world today many co-operatives are starting to re-engage with this and look at how they can fulfil that Rochdale principle, enshrined in our statement on the co-operative identity about how they inform the public, their own employees, their members and young people in particular about the distinct characteristics of co-operatives. I think it is the lack of co-operative education that has made co-operatives invisible to employees, members and the public in many countries. But there are some really interesting developments going on. Across the world there is a whole network of Co-operative Colleges, particularly strong today in Eastern and Southern Africa. They are pioneering work to develop the skills and competencies of both professional and elected leadership in co-operatives. We see initiatives in many parts of the world about running schools within the state education system as co-operatives, bringing co-operative education to a new generation by teaching them about co-operation in the curriculum – over 600 co-operative schools in Spain, over 200 already in the UK, co-operative schools in South America, in Brazil, in Africa and elsewhere, so whole new networks of co-operative education.

But the most the most important thing of all about co-operative education is ensuring members and the wider public can understand more about this distinct co-operative model of

business. From very early days there were always two distinct aspects in what became known as co-operative education. The first is what I would call training, about the core skills that you would need to run any business. If you are a housing co-operative, what are the legal requirements you need to comply with? If you are in a food retail business, what are the food safety standards and the compliance requirements? And they are very different, the distinct business skills that you need from those about actually understanding what a co-operative is, understanding its distinct nature and characteristics and how by putting, for example, the values into practice you can help build business success. Unfortunately in many co-operatives the former, the compliance requirements and the things that they legally have to do, the health and safety training, have become dominant and too often the co-operative education has been neglected. We need boards of co-operatives of every type to recognise the critical importance of all aspects – proper investment in training and development of staff at all levels, along with co-operative education for staff, members and the wider public.

Film available at CoOperationdg
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvnVDdQMYk112jAgJ-pvfFA